



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE CORRECTION AND CRITICISM OF COMPOSITION WORK¹

STERLING ANDRUS LEONARD

Horace Mann School, Teachers College, Columbia University

I wish to present some suggestions toward a method of criticizing children's oral and written compositions where such compositions are the presentation of their real ideas to interest their classmates or another audience. First of all, it appears necessary that criticism should start always from the unbiased valuing of each child's spontaneous speech or writing by his classmates, who hear it. We need to begin with the children's own crude expression of their ideas, and with their own raw and genuine appreciations; for this is our sole means of knowing what they are capable of, our starting-ground from which to guide them to better expression. Our first aim in direction of the spontaneous class criticism, then, may well be simply the attempt, by example and suggestion, to see that the class attitude is, so far as may be, constructive and co-operative instead of picking and finical. From such a beginning we may proceed most effectually to sharpen the class discriminations, to develop standards and principles of effective work and of criticism.

Upon this basis of free expression and evaluation the chief point I should like to make is that we need to discriminate sharply what we may for convenience label (I) matters for correction and (II) matters for criticism.² The first type, matters for correction, includes all the form-conventions of written and spoken English which we can establish in practically unconscious *habit*—essentials of correct grammatical usage, spelling, punctuation, and the like decencies of social communication. The second type includes matters just as essential as the form-conventions—command of

¹ Given before the National Council of Teachers of English, New York City, July 7, 1916. Adapted from chaps. iii and iv of *English Composition as a Social Problem*, in publication as a Riverside Educational Monograph, Houghton Mifflin Co.

² See list of essentials at the end of this paper, p. 603.

effective organization of ideas, of strong and clear sentence structure, and of true and apt wording. These, however, are probably never achieved as habitual and unconscious reactions; they can be developed only through maturing skill and nimbleness of conscious choice in meeting many varied problems of expression. They need, also, to be handled by suggestive criticism, not by prescriptive correction.

To make this clearer, we may examine in turn the two types thus discriminated and the probably successful mode of dealing with each. First, as to forms: It is clear that the only useful attainment here—in correct use of “lie” and “lay,” for instance, in correct spelling of necessary common words, in correct use of periods—is full and final establishment in habit of each point that is really worth attempting. There is no room in any of these matters for a standard of 60 or of 90 per cent; a youngster either has mastered an essential point of form or has not; he has, then, 100 per cent or zero.¹ Matters beyond the small range of possible mastery in this fashion cannot be subject to prescriptive correction, but must be considered under suggestive criticism (II) later. I believe that if we once accept such a standard of full attainment as a test both for judging the work of each child we consider eligible for promotion and likewise for estimating his teacher’s performance in this one field, there will be less futile and scattering, nagging correction and more attainment of a few essentials. Merely as a tentative sketch, and with no idea of prescription in these matters—they must obviously be settled by careful study and experiment in each school or school system—I venture to suggest at the end of this article, under (I), a tentative list of possible minima by grade groups in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and the like. It is intended that the forms for each group be divided among the teachers, so that each one shall be responsible for only three or four points in grammar, one rule in punctuation, and so on; the list is made up on the assumption that so much is quite possible of 100 per cent attainment under normal conditions.²

¹ Cf. Dr. Reynolds, “For Minimum Standards in English,” *English Journal*, IV, 349.

² Cf. Klapper, *Teaching of English*, pp. 33 ff.

Our eternally criticized failure to achieve satisfactory results in this region of form-conventions is due chiefly, I have maintained, to our having attempted too much. There may be possible a further gain in our method of attaining our ends. Two suggestions from the work of successful teachers may be worth attention. In the first place, we might pay more heed than we have often done to a child's realization of need of the form we are to help him establish. This realization may be gained for punctuation marks, for example, by having each child's theme read aloud by another child; by the inevitable stumblings and hesitations we may show the writer that he has not so provided it with periods or commas as to make it quite readily and fully clear. Where, as we have assumed, the child has actually wanted to express his own ideas for a social purpose, we may safely trust that realization thus gained will have effect. Again, for discovering suitable forms of manuscript or of oral address, we may let the members of the class experiment, compare their way with someone else's, and decide what they prefer and will accept. No one who has tried both methods needs to be told how far more effective this may be made than mere rule-of-thumb prescription. It is true that in many matters of grammar and spelling we can simply note the correct form and make clear that it alone is right and acceptable; some kind of realized need of a given form, in any event, is the first essential step.

For success in establishing these forms, it is further necessary to restore the "lost art of drill"; we must work unceasingly with countless examples of a single right form, and "suffer no exceptions to occur," until we get the form so firmly drilled in and fixed that it can never again come up wrong end to. Certainly teachers have not lacked conscientiousness in this matter, but apparently we have both tried too many things at a time and failed to make our drills short and sharp with motive.¹ We need to concentrate and work patiently on one form only; and we need, so far as we can, to provide normal social situations for the use of this right form, whether in games or in working out communal projects. We need further to insist on more thoroughgoing proofreading of written work, point by point, for every form-matter actually

¹ McMurry, *How to Study*, p. 191, etc.

determined upon, and resolutely inhibit prescription and correction beyond these narrow limits. Only so can we hope for the 100 per cent attainment which we should aim for in these matters.

The suggestion of a list of minimum essentials for each grade and of proscription of all attempts at points beyond that list, until so much is secured, undoubtedly seems pretty rigid and radical. Many teachers will fear that hosts of impossibly bad forms beyond the list for any year will fix themselves irremovably in habit. The point I would make is simply that very few form-habits indeed are *really possible of achievement* in a given time, and probably no more than one of a kind at one time. We had better hold resolutely, then, to attempting no more than we can do. When we have our minima perfectly achieved, it will be time enough to attempt other points. The idea seems more reasonable the more one thinks about it: that merely to correct a fault without setting to work with patient zeal to fix a good habit in its place can have no possible result save unsettling, confusion, and loss of joy and readiness in children's expression of their ideas.

So much for the achievement of form-minima. The matters for suggestive criticism (II) are equally essential and are to be as untiringly worked for. It is indeed for the purpose of leaving room for proper attention to these important matters that I believe the form-conventions to be drilled in should be very few. The more these latter can be handed over to the "effortless custody of automatism," the more children can be free to devote conscious attention and judgment to other essentials.¹ But the matters for suggestive criticism appear to be amenable to an entirely different attack. For ways of thought-organization and of clearness and vigor and artistry in sentences and words are not reducible to unconscious habits; and such a result would scarcely be desirable if it were possible. A child must of course discover that he needs firmer prevision, or stronger sentences, or more expressive and fitting words. But while we will initiate as long and carefully ordered campaigns for gaining minimum essentials here as in the matter of forms, their end will not be habit-formation. It must be in every case simply increasing skill in adapting means to given

¹ Cf. James, *Principles of Psychology*, I, chap. iv.

specific ends. And this must be always a conscious process, a determined experimenting and deciding what arrangement, relation of ideas, or wording best fits the immediate need.

Effective organization, for example, is always an affair of adapting ideas to a purpose. It consists of selecting, grouping, and arranging subject-matter with a view to its clearness and interest *for a particular audience*, and to its value in informing or amusing or influencing them. The problem is one, not mainly of logic, but of psychology, as, indeed, Aristotle's *Rhetoric* was largely concerned in pointing out. Sentence structure likewise is a product, not of rhetorical rules, but of the attempt to fit ideas into lucid and forceful relation and effect a purpose. Word-choices, whether for exactness or artistry, are pre-eminently governed by this same principle of adaptation. Study in these fields, then, can evolve useful general principles and give practice in applying them to numberless, varying situations; and this may result, not in fixing habits, but in increasing skill and readiness in meeting other like problems.

I would then suggest for work in bettering children's speech and writing a definite attention to two sorts of matters. The teacher or supervisor can best judge composition teaching by this two-branched standard: First, most objective and simple, do all the children who should be passed to a higher grade possess the few solid form-habits suggested (I) for attainment in the given year—entirely mastered, not 60 or 90 per cent achieved? Second, and not so open to exact and easy judgment, do they, in the equally few specific matters determined upon for suggestive criticism and betterment, show reasonable growth in sureness and readiness, with at the same time—perhaps the most essential criterion—no loss in their spontaneous joyousness in expression?

A SUGGESTED LIST OF MINIMUM ESSENTIALS IN ENGLISH

INTENDED AS A BASIS OF FURTHER STUDY AND ADAPTATION TO THE CONDITIONS
IN INDIVIDUAL SCHOOL SYSTEMS

I. Matters for establishment in unconscious habit—form-essentials. The aim with these should be full 100 per cent attainment, not "a namby-pamby achievement of about 75 per cent":

A.—Requisite Grammatical Forms

Grades I-III: I did, I have done, I saw, I have seen, Who's been lying in my bed? I haven't any, you were, may I? he plays well.

Grades IV-VI: I have gone, I came, I have come, he (etc.) doesn't, *an* apple, with you and *me*, do *as* we do, *let* it go, there were six men, *those* hats.

Grades VII-IX: If I were you, if I had been, I wish he had been, if he should come, I shall drown; with (1) the principal parts of 9 or 10 most troublesome verbs (cf. the Boise list), especially *lie*, *sit*, *rise*, and (2) agreement of pronouns with a *person* and *everybody*; he would have liked to *go*.

For the later high-school years, there should remain little of this type of study besides further needful systematizing of points learned, such as the subjunctives.

B.—Necessary Punctuation

Grades I-VI: Unfailing end-punctuation of sentences through a developed *sentence-sense*—an enviable achievement; probably also pointing of undivided quotations, direct address, and simplest letter-headings.

Grades VII-IX: Pointing the series, the compound sentence (in Grade IX, without conjunction), and grammatically independent elements.

Grades X-XII: Punctuation of non-restrictives—adjective, adverbial, appositional, phrase or clause; probably of adverbial clauses before the sentence-subject.

C.—Spelling and Pronunciation

Full mastery of a small *use-vocabulary* (cf. the Ayers and Jones lists); the "100 demons" by Grade VI; troublesome contractions and possessives; see also Mr. Lester's 900 words for high-school age (the Hill School).

D.—Further Necessary Courtesies

Of speech and writing—clear speech, good posture, neat manuscript forms determined by the class.

II. Matters for conscious attention always, aided by suggestions of more effective modes of expression:

A.—Organization or Prevision of Ideas

Grades IV-VIII: Ability to *plan* a single-topic (or paragraph) narrative or explanation in time order by telling what shall happen first, what next, etc.

Grades IX-XII: Ability (1) to plan a single topic giving *facts* grouped about, or supporting, a central interpretive or topic sentence; (2) to apply

the fundamental arrangement principles; particularly, to go from what is known or simple to the reader to what is difficult, and to place striking details first and reserve the significant to the last; and (3) to organize a number of topics (3 or 4) upon a broader theme.

B.—Clearness and Force in Sentences

Grade VII or VIII: Clearness of pronouns and modifiers—attention only to quite obvious cases.

Grade VIII or IX: Holding to the “sentence-plan” (cf. Baldwin, *Writing and Speaking*, pp. 4-6).

Grade IX: Clear and strong *relation* in sentences, with major ideas in separate sentences or in the main propositions, and minor ones in clauses or phrases.

Grade X or XI: Putting important ideas in striking places—chiefly, out of their usual sentence-order.

Grade XI or XII: Building like ideas alike in such simple and definite cases as words or phrases in series or joined by *and*.

C.—Accuracy and Aptness in Word-Choices

A matter of gradually developing appreciation and command of wording that is true and specific and fitted to the audience and the purpose in hand; this is to be secured, not by prescribing accepted word-choices, but by discovering need of gaining better effects and by definitely studying expression that is clear and pleasing, whether the work of other children or more finished prose and poetry.